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The development of teacher autonomy in collaborative lesson preparation: A multiple-case study of EFL teachers in China



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a 3-year case study of four novice EFL teachers in China that examined the impact of collaborative lesson preparation on the development of their teacher autonomy, and the joint impact of collaboration and autonomy on their professional development. Data analysis of 48 individual interviews, 47 journal entries, and 26 classroom observation sessions has revealed: (1) the collaboration takes two forms: the product-oriented collaboration dedicated to producing a complete, ready-to-use set of teaching resources as a visible product, and the problem-based collaboration featuring discussions on certain teaching issues, which does not provide concrete help in physical forms but inspires insights and facilitates exchange of teaching experience; and (2) the two types of collaborative lesson preparation have different impacts on the development of novice teachers' autonomy which is mediated by the level of teacher anxiety provoked by the circumstances of collaboration. Suggestions based on the findings are proposed as to joining collaboration and autonomy for synergy to promote teacher development.

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1. Introduction

In language teacher education research, there have been two approaches to conceptualizing and examining teacher autonomy (Huang, 2005). On the one hand, teacher autonomy has been widely studied as the empowerment of teachers in curriculum and the school, i.e., the degree of control a teacher is institutionally allowed to have over his or her engagement in educational practices (Bjork, 2006; Ervay, 1979; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010). On the other, teacher autonomy has been defined and examined as a professional attribute to describe teachers who autonomously seek and seize opportunities of professional development in various teaching contexts, in particular those constraining ones (Gu, 2014; Thavenius, 1999; Xu, 2013a). Dierking and Fox (2013) conceptualize autonomy as teachers' inclination to take the initiative in professional development which is primarily associated with improvements in classroom teaching. This line of research focuses on the impact of teacher autonomy on that of the learner (Lamb and Reinders 2008; Little, 1995). This has left the impact of teacher autonomy on teacher development, an equally salient benefit of teacher autonomy, a far less examined issue (Huang, 2005). As teacher autonomy provides teachers with the impetus to initiate efforts for professional improvement, it should play a vital role in promoting teacher development especially in terms of teacher beliefs and teaching practices (Burns & Richards, 2009). To address this gap in the literature, the current study aimed to investigate teacher autonomy as a professional attribute to

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understand how it influences teacher development. To be more specific, the foci of this study is on how teacher autonomy influences teacher development in communities of practice that employ different forms of teacher collaboration (Wenger, 1998), as is the case in primary and secondary schools in China.

The context of the current study, i.e., primary and secondary school settings in China, features a heavy emphasis on teacher collaboration. Teacher collaboration in this context refers to the act of solving problems collaboratively rather than team teaching or co-teaching (Carless, 2006; Hargreaves, 1993). Primary and secondary school teachers in China have the long tradition of school-based collaboration that enables various teacher development activities on an institutional basis (Wu, 2001; Xu, 2012). Teachers are encouraged and organized to exchange pedagogical experience in lesson preparation, classroom management, learning assessment, and so on (Gao & Xu, 2014). As a natural consequence of such collaboration, teachers in China feel more supported and less stressed when encountering challenges and difficulties that may otherwise have to be confronted alone (Xu, 2013a). Meanwhile, excessive collaboration nonetheless seems to increase mutual reliance among teachers that may hamper the development of autonomy (Cowie & Sakui, 2011; Meirink, Imants, Meijer, & Verloop, 2010). This has in some sense led to a dilemma between the promotion of collaboration and that of autonomy in the field of teacher development (Maylone, Ranieri, Griffin, McNulty, & Fitzpatrick, 2011; Xu, 2013a). However, this apparent dilemma seems to be based on an overgeneralization of the relationship between collaboration and autonomy which assumes that all forms of collaboration and all levels of autonomy interact in a uniform pattern. Therefore, it is worth more research endeavors to more closely examine the diverse possibilities of how teacher collaboration (e.g., of different forms) and teacher autonomy (e.g., at different stages of professional development) interact with reference to their joint impact on teacher development.

The current study inquired into the development of teacher autonomy of a group of novice EFL teachers who engaged in different types of collaboration with their colleagues at school in China. Compared to studies on more experienced teachers, studies on novice teachers may better reveal the joint impact of collaboration and autonomy on teacher development (Farrell, 2009; Johnson, 1992). Novice teachers often need more support and guidance through collaboration with experienced peers, and thus show less reluctance to participate in collaborative activities when asked to (Farrell, 2006; Johnston, 2009); yet, in the same breath, they tend to think much of their professional freedom, and are highly motivated to implement their own ideas for teaching and achieve personal goals of professional development (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009; Farrell, 2007; Gao, Barkhuizen, & Chow, 2011). This situation may best represent the interaction between teacher collaboration and teacher autonomy which can constitute either a conflicting or a reciprocal relationship (Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou, 2007; Kennedy, 2005; Xu, 2013a).

This three-year case study of four novice EFL teachers focuses on the development of novice teachers' autonomy in collaborative lesson preparation, a traditional school-based activity in China in which teachers who teach different classes of the same grade work together to prepare lessons. Using a longitudinal design, the study examined the impact of teacher collaboration on the development of teacher autonomy, and how such impacts varied over time.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher autonomy: an attribute for professional development

Research on teacher autonomy as a professional attribute has primarily focused on the factors that influence its development. A general consensus seems to have been reached that teacher autonomy as one of the dimensions of teacher affect develops in interaction with other important dimensions thereof (Borg, 2006, 2009), which include teacher beliefs (e.g., Warfield, Wood, & Lehman, 2005), work stress (e.g., Pearson & Moomaw, 2005), teacher identities (e.g., Xu, 2013b), and so on. These studies have situated the development of teacher autonomy in a complex system of teacher affect (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008), and are consequently subject to a more holistic interpretation of the synergetic effect of the various dimensions including teacher autonomy and a rather general conclusion that all dimensions play a role without specifying what roles are played by which dimension and how (Lantolf, 2000). In other words, the limitation of exploring the issue of teacher autonomy within an inclusive teacher affect framework is that the unique contribution of teacher autonomy and the special conditions that help maximize this contribution are inevitably obscured as the framework is not designed to highlight teacher autonomy only. Therefore, more research is needed to further examine teacher autonomy as a more independent factor rather than being cluttered with a huge number of others so as to better appreciate its contribution to teacher development.

Another line of research has revealed that the development of teacher autonomy is also closely related to teachers' educational practices (Johnson, 2009; Ushioda, Smith, Mann, & Brown, 2011). Dierking and Fox (2013) have found that an increase in pedagogical knowledge can promote teacher autonomy mediated by a concurrent change in the teacher's attitudes and confidence. Castle (2006) has demonstrated connections of hands-on experience of pedagogical research to the enhancement of teacher autonomy in a study that adopted a stance of teacher as pedagogical researcher. Besides, practice-related activities like critical reflection on practice also facilitate the development of teacher autonomy (Harrison, Lawson, & Wortley, 2005). It is interesting to note that comparatively few studies have investigated factors that hamper teacher autonomy development. It seems that overdependence on peer support (Cowie & Sakui, 2011; Meirink et al., 2010) and suppressing institutional circumstances (Dymoke & Harrison, 2006) have been the only documented impeding factors based on empirical studies, but the specific mechanisms for these factors to take effect have not been sufficiently explained.

As has been discussed above, previous studies have thrown light on the various affect- and practice-related factors that promote or hamper the development of teacher autonomy. However, a limitation is obvious that they have rarely examined

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